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# Political Science, Terrorism and Gender

Eva Herschinger\*

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**Abstract:** »Politikwissenschaft, Terrorismus und Gender«. This contribution aims to give an overview on the state of the art of research on terrorism and gender in the field of Political Science and International Relations (IR). Contemporary analyses of terrorism have begun integrating gender aspects into their frameworks. This article supports the call for a much more coherent use of gender as an analytical category as this is beneficial for the analysis of terrorism in a threefold manner. First, gender as an analytical category in the study of terrorism exposes the gender blindness of the term terrorism; second, gender challenges the political myth of protection central to international politics, i.e. that states can legitimately fight wars to protect the vulnerable – *vulgo* women and children. Third, gender also challenges the myth of an intrinsic peacefulness/vulnerability of women. The paper closes with the plea to integrate a coherent historical dimension into a gendered analysis of terrorism in order to potentially achieve a more empirically attuned theoretical understanding of terrorism and political violence in current times.

**Keywords:** Political science, terrorism, gender, female violence, International Relations.

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## 1. Introduction

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“In September 2001 the obscure academic field in which I had quietly toiled for many years, terrorist movements, was suddenly plunged into limelight” (Richardson 2006, 1). Albeit written in 2006, the introductory observation of Louise Richardson in her seminal book *What terrorists want* still stands: it is somewhat stating the obvious that, today, analyses of terrorism – in particular of transnational or international terrorism – are at an all-time high in Political Science and International Relations (IR).<sup>1</sup> Indeed, with the attacks of September 11, the declaration of the *war on terror*, and the interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, the amount of literature on terrorism seemed to increase at lightning speed. Andrew Silke, a longstanding terrorism researcher, estimated in 2007 that “a new book on terrorism is published every six hours in the English

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<sup>1</sup> Like the other contributions in this HSR Special Issue, this paper defines terrorism as specific form of political violence carried out by sub-state groups.

language” (quoted in Shepherd 2007a). Likewise, Richard Jackson, co-founder of the new journal *Critical Terrorism Studies* believed that scholarly papers on terrorism in the discipline of IR have increased by 300% since September 2001 (quoted in Shepherd 2007a).<sup>2</sup> Thus, albeit terrorism being an age-old phenomenon, it turned from being a rather marginal to a central issue for political scientists and most importantly for scholars of IR. Today, no handbook or introduction to Political Science and IR misses an entry on terrorism (see for recent examples: Wilkinson 2010; Bueno de Mesquita 2013; Keohane 2011; Daase and Spencer, forthcoming). Terrorism is no longer an *obscure* matter.

This ascent of terrorism, making its way up the academic agenda, is to some extent paralleled by the rise of feminist theorizing in Political Science and IR. The 1990s have witnessed a strong increase in feminist analyses; and in particular the first decade of the 21st century was marked by a growing interest in questions of gender. Today, the main academic organizations such as the *European Consortium of Political Research* (ECPR), the *American Political Science Association* (APSA) and the *International Studies Association* (ISA) have large and highly active groups on the study of gender. Like terrorism, gender or feminist theories, as they are called in Political Science and IR, have become a regular entry in Political Science handbooks and IR introductory texts (see for recent examples: Wibben 2010; Finke 2010; Mazur 2012).

Yet, inquiries into the relation between terrorism and gender have not increased at the same speed. For instance, the influential volume *Research on Terrorism* of 2004 does not even include an entry on gender, and only one contribution of the state-of-the-art collection *Mapping Terrorist Research* of 2007 addresses the question of gender, calling it “an area that is all too often neglected in security studies in general, and in counterterrorism research in particular” (Crelinsten 2007, 229). Notwithstanding the fact that both volumes are interdisciplinary endeavors – clearly, terrorism studies have never been the home turf of one single scientific discipline – the picture they convey nicely portrays Political Science and IR as well. Indeed, it is only in the last couple of years that political scientists and IR scholars have bothered to look closer on gender and terrorist violence. Traditionally, studies into terrorism were concerned with men and their activities.

Nevertheless, a burgeoning body of contemporary analyses of terrorism in IR and Political Science have begun to address the question of gender explicitly (for a first overview see Brunner et al. 2008). However, the issue is approached quite differently. Regarding women as victims of terrorist and counter-terrorist

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<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to note that this most recent increase in terrorism publications exceeds an already impressive growth of scholarly papers on terrorism between 1988 and 2001, estimated at around 234% on average and stemming from such diverse fields as terrorism studies, communication studies, comparative politics, peace studies, economics and psychology. See Gordon (2004).

violence, a number of studies exist that apply gender as an analytical category. Thus, they define gender, first, as “a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes” and, second, as “a primary way of signifying relationships of power” (Scott 1986, 1067). However, when it comes to women as perpetrators of terrorist violence – with which the bulk of present literature deals – gender is nearly always understood as difference in sexes whereas discussing gender as way to signify relationships of power is avoided.

In the light of the growing interest into questions of terrorism and gender, this contribution aims to give an overview on the state of the art of the matter in the fields of Political Science and International Relations. Thereby, the article supports the call for a more coherent use of gender as an analytical category as, for example, voiced by the studies on women as victims of terrorist and counter-terrorist violence. Indeed, a great number of feminist studies in Political Science and IR have shown that integrating an analytical perspective on gender is highly beneficial for studying a range of political and international phenomena or events (cf. Finke 2010; Sjoberg and Tickner 2013).

Drawing, most importantly, on central insights of feminist studies on international politics that called for applying gender as an analytical category to issues of security and political violence for quite some time (cf. for an overview Sjoberg and Tickner 2013; also Sjoberg 2009), I argue that present and future studies on terrorism and gender can benefit from these insights. In particular, I claim that three advantages reside in addressing gender. First, gender as an analytical category in the study of terrorism is able to expose the gender blindness of the term terrorism; second, gender challenges the political myth of protection central to (international) politics, i.e. that states can legitimately fight wars to protect the vulnerable – *vulgo* women and children. Third, by including gender as an analytical category into one’s study one also challenges the myth of an intrinsic peacefulness/vulnerability of women and, thereby, imbues terrorism research with insights from the study of political violence in general.

In the following, the paper sets out to discuss the reasons for the increasing interest of political scientists and IR-scholars with terrorism and gender (section two). This is followed by an overview on current studies on terrorism and gender, outlining the main research foci of this body of work (section three). Since this research is above all interested in the reasons for female involvement in terrorist activities, the section puts special emphasis thereon. As in recent years IR has been *the* field of vibrant research on terrorism and the bulk of the studies discussed here are written from an IR-perspective, my overview quite naturally exhibits a certain concentration on IR-studies. The fourth section critically discusses the differences between these studies to outline the potential of integrating gender as an analytical concept for political scientists and IR-scholars researching terrorism. The paper closes with a plea to integrate a historical dimension into a gendered analysis of terrorism.

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## 2. Why Terrorism and Gender?

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Why have observers of terrorism recently developed an interest in questions of gender? What are the reasons for this nascent focus? While one can take two perspectives on terrorism and gender – first, focusing on those affected by terrorist attacks and counter-terrorism, and, second, on the perpetrators of such attacks – contemporary literature from political scientists and IR scholars on the subject is much more interested in the second view. Or, to put it in a nutshell: the increasing attention to gender in the study of terrorism has a great deal more to do with women being involved in violence and less with women being the victims of terrorist and counter-terrorist violence. This is not to say that violence against women is not analyzed (as will be discussed below); however, the current interest owes a lot to the fact that “most observers remain surprised and baffled by women’s willingness to engage in political violence, especially within the context of terrorism” (Cunningham 2003, 173; see also Schraut 2012, 17).

This astonishment is quite baffling by itself. After all, looking at history provides us with numerous examples of women’s involvement in political violence, making it difficult to consider female terrorist violence as a new phenomenon (see also the introduction by Sylvia Schraut and Klaus Weinbauer in this HSR Special Issue). Historically, women have been involved in terrorist activities and have been members of terrorist groups. Some readers might have heard of such prominent female terrorists of the 1960s to the 1980s like Shigenobu Fusako, founder and leader of the Japanese Red Army, like Ulrike Meinhof and Gudrun Ensslin, part of the leading team of the German *Rote Armee Fraktion*, or like Nathalie Ménigon, co-leader of the French *Action Directe*.

Yet, the growing (scientific) interest in female violence can be attributed to a number of empirical events and to the relevance of September 11, 2001 for research on terrorism in general. First, although the numbers of female terrorists “have been historically small in comparison to males, as is true today” (Ness 2005b, 349), it is worth pointing out that the involvement of Muslim women in terrorism is a rather recent development. There is also, second, the novel phenomenon of female suicide terrorists which is strongly irritating to some observers as these women stemmed from societies that are in general highly restrictive of women’s public roles (*vulgo* societies within which Islam is either the official religion or has a very strong foothold) (see among others Speckhard 2008). Third – and also in relation to that – with the contemporary rise of so-called *Islamic* terrorism, observers tend to equate the assumed invisibility of women in Islamic societies with their low-profile role in Islamic terrorist organizations – which other than logistic or supporting roles could women embrace in Islamic societies? This invisibility, fourth, is further strengthened by the traditional view of their role as essentially passive which has led scholars to focus on male terrorists and their actions. For many, women

have been mere supporters who are involved in logistics, intelligence gathering, providing safe houses or mental support (Cunningham 2003, 173). In these functions, again, female terrorists are more or less invisible – and are these (assumed) passive roles not inherently less interesting than the one of males? Overall, this invisibility makes female terrorists an even more difficult target for scholarly inquiry in a field that traditionally struggles with the problem of how to collect primary sources (Schmid and Jongman 1988; Merari 1991; Silke 2001; Horgan 2004; Weinberg and Eubank 2008), and which constantly risks to be “repetitive and ill-informed” (Silke 2004, 2).

Finally, women as terrorists contradict a number of gender stereotypes, most importantly the idea of women being vulnerable and in need of protection. Moreover,

the media’s treatment of female terrorists is consistent with the patterns of societal gender stereotypes in general and of gender biases in the news coverage of female politicians in particular. In other words, gender stereotypes are found in the news about nonviolent and violent political actors (Nacos 2005, 436).

Women as terrorists? Indeed an interesting empirical puzzle in need of scientific explanation. How this puzzle has been addressed in contemporary writings on terrorism and gender from a political science and IR perspective is the topic of the next section.

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### 3. Current Studies on Terrorism and Gender in Political Science and IR

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The first thing one has to acknowledge when aiming at an overview is the interdisciplinary character of both terrorism and gender research. It is worth mentioning that both stem from such diverse disciplines as politics, psychology, anthropology, history or peace and conflict studies to name only a few, and that both draw on different concepts, approaches and theories, and discuss subjects and issues relevant to many disciplines. Yet, one might muse on the question whether both are already disciplines in their own right or, for instance, deplore that “much non-feminist analysis throughout the social sciences has ignored feminist scholarship on gender” (Mazur 2012, 533) and that the “science of terror” has been “conducted in the cracks and crevices which lie between the large academic disciplines” (Silke 2004, 1).<sup>3</sup> Be that as it may; the following overview will be organized broadly according to the distinction introduced above between women as victims and women as perpetrators.

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<sup>3</sup> See on the question whether terrorism research is already a discipline or not: Gordon (2010).

### 3.1 First Perspective on Gender: Women as Victims of Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism

While it has always been acknowledged that women are victims of terrorist violence, the discussion took a different turn with the *Global War on Terror* (GWOT).<sup>4</sup> Studies recurrently analyze the entanglement of terrorism and counter-terrorism producing the same problems for women, i.e. being victims and suffering from both. Central to this strand of literature is the question in how far women's rights and their protection have been used (and abused) to justify the GWOT, in particular by US-officials (see among others Eisenstein 2007; Shepherd 2007b, 2008b; Chin 2013). The former critique is deeply suspicious about the "strategic purchase of women's rights to moralize a war whose moral compass was seemingly set more by imperial designs than any genuine commitment to women's emancipation" (Allison 2013b, 321). Feminist analyses strongly disapproved of George W. Bush's claim that US-led interventions are meant to save Afghan and Iraqi women – pointing to the disinterest of the administration in the situation of women under the former Taliban regime to reveal the claim's opportunism (see above all the contributions in Hunt and Rygiel 2008). Worse, it is argued that this claim of the Bush Administration was not only a smokescreen but also has had domestic repercussions because it aimed to influence how US-Americans think about and conceptualize the struggle for women's rights in general (see Ferguson 2005).

As feminist deplore, in the course of the GWOT, the United States administration developed a seemingly enlightened understanding of Muslim women. "In contrast to orientalist representations of Muslim women's passivity and victimisation within brutal Islamic cultures these emerging representations posit Muslim women in terms of their modernity and liberation" (Allison 2013a, 665). These images of Muslim women being both modern and religiously devout are seemingly giving Muslim women agency or an autonomous voice. This agency is only seemingly attributed as Muslim women are – according to human rights reports – still the main victims of the GWOT, in particular in Pakistan.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, the GWOT-logic extends beyond the United States as primary protagonist. In Pakistan, for instance, the two main representations in the GWOT discourse (political and academic) force women to navigate between two roles:

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<sup>4</sup> Most importantly, the overall discussion on women being victims of state and non-state violence focuses on the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on "Women, Peace and Security" as the resolution was meant to ensure that all aspects of conflict management, post-conflict resolution and peace building incorporate a gender dimension, i.e. are sensitive for aspects of gender, in particular gender as a mode of exclusion. See, for a recent piece, Shepherd (2011).

<sup>5</sup> See for example: <<http://www.humanrights.asia/news/ahrc-news/AHRC-STM-059-2008>> (accessed February 17, 2014).

they are “victims of the war or *agentive* bearers of male nationalist and Islamist cultural politics” (Zia 2013a, 323), thereby heralded as the new Muslim women in the West. Yet, the outcome is disappointing according to a number of feminists: “Neither role has served as a driver of women’s particularized personal or political rights in substantive ways in Pakistan” and women are “the real losers” (Zia 2013a, 323) of the GWOT (see also Sharlach 2008; contributions in Sjöberg and Gentry 2011; contributions in Huckerby and Sattertherwaite 2013a).

As acknowledging and implementing the agency of women has been a constant and recurrent call by feminists, the latter felt deeply entrapped by the GWOT-discourse and hotly debated on how to deal with these problems of seeming co-optation of feminism for sustaining violent global structures and apparent agency for women. Contemporary answers cover the full range from silence to outspoken resistance and await further debate (exemplary here is the exchange between Nicola Pratt and Afiya Shehrbano Zia in: Zia 2013a, b; Pratt 2013a, b). Yet, in light of these intricacies of the GWOT the important task ahead for feminist scholars in Political Science and IR in particular lies in “the need to reaffirm the legitimacy of women’s diverse experiences as we strive to critically analyze global power structures and articulations of women’s agency in the twenty-first century” (Chin 2013, 318).

A slightly different approach to counter-terrorism and the GWOT is taken by recent studies putting human rights in the focus of the analysis, arguably an absent factor in current literature on terrorism and gender. These writings aim at “gendering” human rights and counter-terrorism in order to enlighten “the different ways women, men, and sexual minorities experience counter-terrorism” (Huckerby and Sattertherwaite 2013b, 2) since the full scope of gender-based rights violations has been invisible so far to human rights communities and politicians alike. A gendered human rights analysis of counter-terrorism *inter alia* allows to understand the gendered impacts of female family member interrogation in case of a relative being a terrorist suspect (Kassem 2013), which impact drone strikes have on the civilian population, in particular on women (for a critical discussion of drones in general see Sauer and Schörnig 2012) or how programmes of counter-radicalization affect women’s rights (Brown 2013) but also that extreme human rights violations may lead women to violence, i.e. terrorist activity, as Margaret Gonzalez-Perez finds in her contribution entitled *Equal opportunity to terrorism. Women terrorists in comparative perspective* (Gonzalez-Perez 2013).

### 3.2 Second Perspective on Gender: Women as Perpetrators of Terrorism

While the call for equality for women is as recurrent in feminist analyses as is the issue of agency, putting the agency of the female terrorist at the center of attention is a different matter. Still, this is the second perspective of the litera-



ture on terrorism and gender within Political Science and IR: women are not solely victims but women are also perpetrators of terrorist attacks. Thus, this part of the literature is on female violence and a quick glance at it highlights that it is not too far-fetched to argue that the bulk of this writing follows a particular line of reasoning. Irrespective of whether in the media or in scientific research, inquiries into the participation of women in terrorist activities depart all too often from a historically derived and anthropologically different relationship between politically violent men and women. As a result, the base line is, as Sylvia Schraut has recently noted, that “there must be specific conditions that motivate women to engage in political violence” (Schraut 2012, 17; see for an early example of this kind of research Crenshaw 2000). Despite their potential merits, the greatest part of these studies is not interested in gender as an analytical category but in gender as difference in sex. This is also a major difference to the writings discussed above, which focus on women as victims of terrorist violence and counter-terrorism, among which a great number of gendered analyses can be found.

A recent review of the last 25 years of terrorism research (from 1983-2006 and including a great variety of disciplines) confirms this lack of gendered analysis with regard to female terrorist violence. It shows that out of 54 publications since 1983, 22 (i.e. 41%) are historical overviews of female involvement in terrorist activities (Jacques and Taylor 2009, 504); eleven studies examined the perceptions of female terrorists in general and in the media; six articles focused on feminism and gender in their analysis of female violence, while the motives of women were discussed throughout the whole sample of literature (Jacques and Taylor 2009, 504-6). Most of the six articles applying a gender perspective on female terrorist violence stem from the field of Political Science and IR (Alison 2004; Gentry 2004; West 2004; Brunner 2005a; Berko, and Erez 2007). Although the review dates from 2009, it portrays a literature that rarely addresses gender as analytical category but gender in terms of sex.

As primary sources are difficult to obtain in the field of terrorism (see above), it is not astonishing that the greatest part of writings on female terrorists in Political Science and IR gives an overview of the history of women and their involvement in terrorism. This has been the route research has taken since the 1970s, when the topic of the female terrorist moved onto the agenda of terrorism studies. In these years, the research was quite diverse: different regional foci (Latin America, Russia, and Western Europe), different types of violent activity (guerilla warfare or extremism) or different types of motivational explanations (societal pressure, psychological reasons) (see among others Knight 1979; Reif 1986; Georges-Abyeie 1983; Weinberg and Eubank 1987; MacDonald 1991; De Cataldo Neuburger and Valentini 1992). As has been outlined in the introduction, since 2000, and in particular since 2001, the number of publications has considerably increased as well as the range of topics covered and also the regions of interest – Israel, Sri Lanka, Chechnya, Iraq, Af-

ghanistan and Pakistan are among the most frequently discussed regions in relation to female terrorism today (see among others Victor 2004; Brunner 2005a; Bloom 2005, 2007, 2011; Cragin and Daly 2009; Rajan 2011; Berko 2012).

### 3.2.1 Reasons for Female Terrorist Violence

As pointed out (and as revealed by the cited overview of Jacques and Taylor above), the question of motivation has been the *epicenter* of most of the studies on female terrorist violence and highlights the disagreement with regard to the prominence of specific reasons (mono- or multicausal?), in particular with regard to female suicide terrorists, as well as with regard to potential differences in motivation between men and women.

Unsurprisingly, analyzing motivation has been the home turf of psychologists who often argue that despite “coercion and trickery [being] involved” sometimes, the women are “in many cases, motivated by trauma and revenge” (Speckhard 2009, 19; see also: Jacques and Taylor 2008, 2009). Yet, this motive is also present in Political Science and IR-studies which discuss the whole range of potential motivations, from social, personal and idealistic to the role of key events and the desire for revenge. Social reasons are *inter alia* the striving for better living conditions, gender equality or the violation of human rights (see among others Alison 2003; Gonzalez-Perez 2013). While nationalism or religion count as idealistic reasons (see among others Holt 2010), personal reasons range from personal distress to monetary worries and are intermingled with the importance of specific events in the life of the women and their desire to take revenge (see among others Victor 2004). The idea that female terrorists resort to violence to liberate themselves, to achieve feminist goals and feminist emancipation, i.e. that women are fighting against oppression in their societies has also been voiced (Berko and Erez 2006). This has been severely criticized as a Western idea, in particular by authors from non-Western countries (Mahmood 2005; Zia 2009).

There has been disagreement on the relevance of each of these reasons, i.e. whether mono-causal explanations really meet the challenge of explaining the involvement of women in terrorism. The general assumption that women become terrorists because of personal motives is heavily discussed. Some argue that “women generally become involved, at least initially, for personal, rather than ideological, reasons” (Bloom 2007, 95) with the *Black Widows* of Chechnya being a case in point, as they aimed to revenge the killing of their husbands in battles with Russian Federation troops. Yet, putting personal reasons at the center mirrors not only “theories about female criminal activity in the domestic realm” (Cunningham 2003, 171); it also diminishes women’s credibility and influence within and outside terrorist organizations. According to proponents of multi-causal explanations, the reasons for women to become terrorists cannot be searched only in reference to the women but have to take external condi-

tions, thus, the bundle of potential reasons – personal, ideological, contextual, logistical etc. – into account. However, the question is not settled and will remain subject to an ongoing debate.

The question of motivation has been most vividly discussed with regard to female suicide terrorists. Between 1985 and 2006, Mia Bloom reports, 15 percent of all suicide bombers were women (Bloom 2007, 95), and they stemmed from secular as well as religious groups, though in particular the latter have been reluctant to use women for their aims. Accordingly, the involvement of Muslim women has caused the most irritation since Islamic societies relegate women to the private sphere, and allow only limited public participation (see Hasso 2005). In addition it is argued that an analysis of their motivation needs to take into account the often highly conflictive situations they live in. Again, what figures prominently in the debate is the question whether personal reasons are crucial or multi-causal explanation need to be advanced. Hence, the explanations for female suicide terrorists do not vary that much: female suicide bombers display by and large the same motivations as female terrorists in general; however, religion is the most prominent among ideological reasons and the conflictive context they live in seems to be an additional stimulus (see among others Nivat 2005; Speckhard 2008, 2009; Gonzalez-Perez 2011).

### 3.2.2 Recruitment and Roles of Women in Terrorist Groups

Many of the studies also question the motives of terrorist organizations to recruit women and investigate the roles of women in these groups. With regard to the latter, the literature notes that in particular European left-wing groups of the 1970s or the *Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam* (LTTE) in Sri Lanka are marked by a strong presence of women, not only in supporting but also in leading roles (Jacques and Taylor 2009). For instance, LTTE women “emphasized that they experience total equality with male comrades in terms of respect and tasks assigned” (Alison 2004, 455) – quite noteworthy given the subordinate role for women in Sinhalese and Tamil societies (Gonzalez-Perez 2013, 262).

Many studies acknowledge that the role of female suicide terrorist has brought a new role for women, in particular as suicide terrorism is predominantly carried out within so-called Islamic terrorism. Women are “agents of death” (Fierke 2009) in societies which normally enact strong restrictions on their public role. However, not only the *Palestinian Liberation Organization* (PLO) and Hamas but also Al-Qaeda used women as suicide bombers. Shortly after Palestinian Wafa Idris blew herself up in 2002, Yassir Arafat publicly honored her, speaking of Palestinian women as his “army of roses” (Victor 2004). Hamas followed, allowing women to engage in suicide missions (Gonzalez-Perez 2011, 58). Even Al-Qaeda has frequently used women as suicide bombers in Iraq to hamper US occupation. By and large, these studies on female suicide terrorism in Islamic and conflictive societies agree that women

“are used as expendable tools and economical weapons and little effort has been made to theologically justify their role” (Gonzalez-Perez 2011, 58; see also Ness 2005a). Furthermore, “[g]roups using women are probably doing so because, at least for the time being, they are able to more easily penetrate security and reach their targets” (Speckhard 2009, 45). This advantage for terrorists plays a role in the discussion on how to prevent terrorism, i.e. that counter-terrorism measures have to factor in that women can be terrorists, too (see Cunningham 2007). In how far women are any longer invisible within terrorist organizations – as stated in some studies early in the 2000s (see for example Cunningham 2003) – and in how far their invisibility and novelty in terms of suicide bombing still is an advantage for terrorist groups is part of the ongoing debate in the literature.

### 3.2.3 Different Reasons for Men and Women?

There has been disagreement in the literature on whether the reasons of women to engage in terrorism differ from those of men. Some argue that there is clear indication of a difference (Bloom 2005, 2007; Berko 2007; Berko and Erez 2007), not only in the reasons but also in the pattern of recruitment, roles and tactics of terrorist groups using women. Advocates of this perspective refer to research on gender highlighting that gender (again here in its meaning as difference in sexes) “has been a motivating factor in resistance movements and security threats, whether expressed in religious, secular, ethnic, or national terms, and at the local, regional and national levels” (Berko and Erez 2007, 494; see also Goldstein 2001; Kimmel 2003; Hoogensen and Vigeland Rottem 2004). Accordingly, gender structures in societies mobilize individuals to join terrorist groups or engage in terrorist activities (Israeli 2004).

However, Cynthia Ness warns

to assign different causal explanations to the same violent behavior in male and female militants/terrorists, the consequence of which has been to imply that what motivates females and males to commit political violence is necessarily different and, by extension, to dichotomize the emotional states that respectively underlie similar behavior (Ness 2005b, 350).

Her warning is of particular importance as it can be read as a critique of the understanding of gender as difference in sexes that underlies the bulk of current literature on terrorism and gender in Political Science and IR.

Currently, a different perspective on male and female terrorists has emerged, i.e. scholars ask whether female participation in terrorist groups makes a difference. In their recent study, Leonard Weinberg and William Eubank aim to provide “an overall perspective on how and under what circumstances the role(s) of women’s involvement in terrorism” changes the overall course of a group in terms of incidents (Weinberg and Eubank 2011, 23). Using the data set of ITERATE, the authors construct gender as a variable apt to analyze over

a period of more than 40 years whether women in a terrorist group made a difference with regard to type of attack, number and type of victims. Their analysis compares female and male terrorist incidents, first at a historical-descriptive and second at an analytical level. While the overall result conveys “no meaningful difference in incidents involving women compared to male results” (Weinberg and Eubank 2011, 39), outcomes are messy, at least when it comes to the potential of arriving at generalizations: it is the context that matters with regard to the roles of women in terrorist organizations (left- or right-wing groups? religious or secular groups?). With regard to suicide terrorism, women are apparently latecomers; yet, it is likely that their number will increase. The authors close with the remark that concerning the type of attacks and the outcomes “women have achieved equality as perpetrators of terrorist violence” (Weinberg and Eubank 2011, 40).

### 3.2.4 Media Representations of Female Terrorists

Cynthia Ness’ warning not to assign different causes to the same violence based on difference in sexes is supported by studies that analyze the media portrayal of female terrorists. In her frequently cited contribution, Brigitte L. Nacos emphasizes that there “is no evidence that male and female terrorists are fundamentally different in terms of their recruitment, motivation, ideological fervor, and brutality” (Nacos 2005, 436) – yet, they are pictured fundamentally different and highly reductionist in the media (for media analyses see also Brunner 2005b; Issacharoff 2006). Portrays oscillate between, on the one hand, the contemporary female terrorist as being trapped by cultural circumstances tied to gender or as a silly girl who has been manipulated by males; and, on the other hand, female terrorists as self-liberating feminist actors with violence working as “an equal opportunity employer” (Ness 2005b, 349).

This kind of portrayal is quite consistent with gender stereotypes in almost all Western societies and, as is argued, it hampers not only the understanding of female terrorism and terrorism as a whole but also the potential options for counter-terrorism policies since gender stereotypes do not only influence those aiming to counter terrorism. These clichés are also known to terrorist groups and are factored in their calculations. Accordingly, “the intelligence community, law enforcement, and others involved in the implementation of anti- and counterterrorism would benefit from understanding and highlighting the gap between the stereotypical female terrorist and the reality of gender roles in terrorist organizations” (Nacos 2005, 436).

Interestingly, the representation of female terrorists in the media has not stimulated a wave of research in Political Science and IR.<sup>6</sup> This is noteworthy for two reasons: first, in the light of the problem to obtain primary sources,

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<sup>6</sup> For analyses from different disciplines see *inter alia*: Naaman (2007); Gardner (2007).

media reports are suitable material to investigate how societies understand and explain female terrorism (in particular for those using discourse analytical tools (see for example Shepherd 2008a); second, the insights gathered can be used to sensitize the community of practitioners, representatives from states and non-state groups for questions of gender beyond the usual stereotypes.

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#### 4. The Benefits of Gender as Analytical Category for Political Scientists and IR Scholars Studying Terrorism

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Before embarking on a critical review of the current state of the art of research on terrorism and gender in Political Science and IR as depicted above, one may conclude so far that studies using gender as analytical category are highly prominent when they are about women as victims of terrorism and counter-terrorism. Gender understood as difference in sexes is most frequent in that part of the literature dealing with women as perpetrators of terrorist violence. One point of critique directly flowing from this observation consists in urging for a more coherent and consistent use of gender as analytical category in both research foci.

##### 4.1 Avoiding Gender Blindness

As the argument of the present contribution states, essentially three advantages for terrorism research reside in using gender as an analytical category. First, doing so avoids the gender blindness of contemporary terrorism research which equates political violence with male violence and is baffled by female violence. As historical research has shown (see the contributions in Hikel and Schraut 2012), conceptualizing gender as difference in sexes only continues to treat female violence as an indication of gender deviance, as a threat to the social order (Ness 2005b, 349). This is very much in line with central dichotomies of Political Science and IR which foreground specific gender associations: for instance, the private/public dichotomy and its association of the male with the public and the female with the private, excluding at least the female from the public realm (Kreisky and Sauer 1997, 16, 37).

Interestingly, this counts as much for the gender clichés in the media as for terrorist groups from societies that accord women only limited public roles. Accordingly, gendering the term terrorism questions androcentric understanding of terrorist violence and opens up space to reflect upon the political advantages of a gender blind concept: what is gained by considering political violence and terrorism as masculine – for terrorists and anti-terrorists alike (see Wibben 2010, 89)? For instance, Al Qaeda or the PLO need to justify female suicide bombers in light of Islam – that they have to do so at great length is a crucial insight into the role of religion for terrorism (see Gonzalez-Perez 2011).

This focus on gender dynamics is difficult to establish if one considers gender as difference in sexes. From this point of view, studies acknowledging simply the increase in female violence entail the risk to “add women and stir” (Mazur 2012, 541), i.e. women as terrorists are only another variable in the larger analysis of terrorism, its dynamics and causes instead of investigating gender in a meaningful way.<sup>7</sup> Arguing in favor of difference between women and men in terms of their motivation as the present literature does, relies on “the gender/sex certainty and the gender/sex hierarchy” (Allen and Shepherd 2012, 3), reproducing exclusionary practices by, for instance, outlining that women are more often motivated by personal reasons than men. This reproduces the public/private dichotomy dear to Political Science and IR instead of rethinking its impact on conceptualizations of terrorist violence.

Studies on counter-terrorism and the GWOT in particular highlighted what a gendered analysis of women as victims of terrorism and counter-terrorism could entail for these dichotomies: women are victims *and* perpetrators. Just contrast Lynndie England, convicted in 2005 in connection with the torture and prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad during the occupation of Iraq, with Jessica Lynch, captured in Iraq and saved in the first rescue operation for an American prisoner of war after Vietnam: England is the hideous other of the heroine Lynch (Romero 2014, in this HSR Special Issue).

## 4.2 Challenging the Myth of Protection

Second, gender as an analytical category in the study of terrorism challenges the political myth of protection central to international politics, i.e. that states can legitimately fight wars because wars are fought to protect vulnerable women and children. Women as aggressors, women as suicide terrorists, women as leaders of terrorists groups severely strain the protection myth as much as the dichotomy of war and peace, so dear and central to IR, associating men with war and women with peace. The research on female terrorism applying an understanding of gender as difference in sexes reproduces and reinforces this myth of protection when it emphasizes the role of personal motives for female violence. Women are motivated if their sphere, i.e. their private sphere is disturbed – but what is to be done with women who become terrorists because of human rights violations in their environment (see Gonzalez-Perez 2013)? Thus, looking “more deeply into these gendered constructions can help us to understand not only some of the causes of war but also how certain ways of thinking about security have been legitimized at the expense of others” (Sjoberg and Tickner 2013, 177).

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<sup>7</sup> The long list of current research desiderata by Bert Jongman is quite exemplary of this myopic view by considering ‘the role of women in terrorist organizations’ (Jongman 2007, 284) as a desideratum without any mentioning of gender.

The research on counter-terrorism applying gender as analytical category has shown that this myth of protection only increases the vulnerability of women and leads to many fatalities among female populations of countries targeted by the GWOT. Worse, in the GWOT women's right and feminist calls for women's agency have been used by officials to justify and legitimize the war. Hence, a gendered analysis of female violence and the myth of protection can elucidate "how and under what circumstances some forms of violence and intervention are seen as legitimate while others are proscribed" (Allen and Shepherd 2012, 2).

#### 4.3 Challenging the Myth of Female Peacefulness

Finally, and third, integrating gender as an analytical category in the study of terrorism challenges the myth of peacefulness and vulnerability of women. Female terrorists contradict the picture of women as inherently, naturally, biologically peaceful, and vulnerable human beings. Applying a gender framework allows not only to "deepen the analysis beyond the relationship of both women and men to violence to analyzing the gendering of violence" (Wibben 2010, 86) but also allows reflecting on the specific agency of female terrorists (see Alison 2004). Female violence and their carrying out of suicide bombings contradict the theory of women being inherently peaceful and more likely to choose peaceful mechanisms for conflict resolution than men.

Without applying gender as an analytical category, as the bulk of writings on female terrorist violence do, it is difficult to see in how far gender governs our idea of how conflicts should be understood and what legitimate proposals to conflict resolution are. Without it, one risks to consider "female violence as a symbol of gender deviance and a challenge to the social order" (Ness 2005b, 349) instead of questioning in how far gender affects and creates forms of legitimacy and authority, of agency as well as access to resources and the potentials for a different counter-terrorism policy.

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### 5. Conclusion

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Political Science and IR have a lot to say on gender and terrorism. It is definitively a field which will flourish in the upcoming years and which provides a promising ground for new insights on terrorism in all its facets. In order to highlight how gender has been addressed in current research on terrorism in Political Science and IR, this overview has differentiated between the works focusing on women as victims of terrorism and counter-terrorism in contrast to studies on women as perpetrators of terrorist violence. To summarize the result in a nutshell: studies of women as victims have integrated gender as analytical



category whereas studies on women as perpetrators understood gender as a difference in sexes.

Hence, referring to the definition of gender by Joan Scott, the latter studies have addressed gender as a “constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes” – but they fall short of considering gender as “a primary way of signifying relationships of power” (Scott 1986, 1067). Thereby, these studies risk giving the sex of a terrorist a foundational status in their analysis – and then, gender works only as a description and not as an analytical tool.

This is unfortunate as some of the literature on female terrorist violence has already shown the benefits of gender as analytical category (see inter alia Ness 2005a; Brunner 2005a; Nacos 2005). In so far, one imminent approach for future research could be the coherent integration of gender as analytical category into the inquiries in female terrorist violence. A range of questions are conceivable, some have already been approached; yet, others await research: In how far do female suicide bombers push the boundaries of relationships of power in the respective societies? What are the effects of women as *agents of death* for terrorist’s organizations, the societies and for counter-terrorism policy? How do terrorist organizations legitimize female violence and what are the effects on terrorist ideologies? In how far do media representations of female violence hamper effective counter-terrorism policy and a gendered understanding of the term terrorism? What are the effects of acknowledging female violence on the 40-year struggle for a global definition of terrorism (see on the debate Herschinger 2013)?

This last question points to a further research desideratum, i.e. the integration of a historical dimension into a gendered analysis of terrorism. In particular, IR is accused of turning a blind eye on history (Schroeder 1997); yet, some advances have been made in bringing history and Political Science and IR closer to each other – as this HSR Special Issue proves. Integrating a historical dimension would mean to go beyond the acknowledgment that the role of women as aggressors is not new and of providing a historical overview on their involvement in terrorism (irrespective of whether they were victims or perpetrators). It would imply to consider, for example, in how far current (media) representations of female terrorists resonate historical figures like Charlotte Corday (see contributions in Hikel and Schraut 2012) or in how far counter-terrorism policies are based on gender stereotypes that antecede September 11, 2001. Hence, by integrating a coherent historical dimension into a gendered analysis of terrorism, we might achieve a more empirically attuned theoretical conception and understanding of terrorism and political violence in current times.

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